Russian Short Stories

The Idiot

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The Idiot by Aleksandr I. Kuprin

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16–20 minutes Translated from Russian by Rosa Savary Graham and Stephen Graham 3,132 words Published 1917

We were seated in a little park, driven there by the unbearable heat of the noonday sun. It was much cooler there than in the streets, where the paving stones, steeped in the rays of the July sun, burnt the soles of one's feet, and the walls of the buildings seemed red-hot. The fine scorching dust of the roadway did not penetrate through the close border of leafy old limes and spreading chestnuts, the latter with their long upright pyramids of rosy flowers looking like gigantic imperial candelabra. The park was full of frolicsome well-dressed children, the older ones playing with hoops and skipping-ropes, chasing one another or going together in pairs, their arms entwined as they walked about with an air of importance, stepping quickly upon the sidewalk. The little ones played at choosing colours, "My lady sent me a hundred roubles," and "King of the castle." And then a group of all the smallest ones gathered together on a large heap of warm yellow sand, moulding it into buckwheat cakes and Easter loaves. The nurses stood round in groups, gossiping about their masters and mistresses; the governesses sat stiffly upright on the benches, deep in their reading or their needlework.

Suddenly the children stopped their playing and began to gaze

intently in the direction of the entrance gate. We also turned to look. A tall bearded peasant was wheeling in before him a bath-chair in which sat a pitiful helpless being, a boy of about eighteen or twenty years, with a flabby pale face, thick, wet, crimson hanging lips, and the appearance of an idiot. The bearded peasant pushed the chair past us and disappeared down a side path. I noticed as he passed that the enormous sharp-pointed head of the boy moved from side to side, and that at each movement of the chair it fell towards his shoulder or dropped helplessly in front of him.

"Poor man!" exclaimed my companion in a gentle voice.

I heard such deep and sincere sympathy in his words that I involuntarily looked at him in astonishment. I had known Zimina for a long time—he was a strong, good-natured, jolly, virile type of man serving in one of the regiments quartered in our town. To tell the truth, I shouldn't have expected from him such sincere compassion towards a stranger's misfortune.

"Poor, of course he is, but I shouldn't call him a man," said I, wishing to get into conversation with Zimina.

"Why wouldn't you?" asked he in his turn.

"Well, it's difficult to say. But surely it's clear to everybody.... An idiot has none of the higher impulses and virtues which distinguish man from the animal... no reason or speech or will.... A dog or a cat possesses these qualities in a much higher degree...."

But Zimina interrupted me.

"Pardon me, please," said he. "I am deeply convinced, on the

contrary, that idiots are not lacking in human instincts. These instincts are only clouded over… they exist deep below their animal feelings.… You see, I once had an experience which gives me, I think, the right to say this. The remembrance of it will never leave me, and every time I see such an afflicted person I feel touched almost to tears.… If you'll allow me, I'll tell you why the sight of an idiot moves me to such compassion."

I hastened to beg him to tell his story, and he began.

"In the year 18—, in the early autumn, I went to Petersburg to sit for an examination at the Academy of the General Staff. I stopped in the first hotel I came to, at the corner of Nevsky Prospect and the Fontanka. From my windows I could see the bronze horses on the parapet of the Anitchka Bridge—they were always wet and gleaming as if they had been covered over with new oilcloth. I often drew them on the marble window-seats of my room.

"Petersburg struck me as an unpleasant place, it seemed to be always enveloped in a melancholy grey veil of drizzling rain. But when I went into the Academy for the first time I was overwhelmed and overawed by its grandeur. I remember now its immense broad staircase with marble balustrades, its high-roofed amphilades, its severely proportioned lecture-hall, and its waxed parquet floor, gleaming like a mirror, upon which my provincial feet stepped warily. There were four hundred officers there that day. Against the modest background of green Armenian uniforms there flashed the clattering swords of the Cuirassiers, the scarlet breasts of the Lancers, the white jackets

of the Cavalry Guards, waving plumes, the gold of eagles on helmets, the various colours of facings, the silver of swords. These officers were all my rivals, and as I watched them in pride and agitation I pulled at the place where I supposed my moustache would grow by and by. When a busy colonel of the General Staff, with his portfolio under his arm, hurried past us, we shy foot soldiers stepped on one side with reverent awe.

“The examination was to last over a month. I knew no one in all Petersburg, and in the evening, returning to my lodging, I experienced the dullness and wearisomeness of solitude. It was no good talking to any of my companions; they were all immersed in sines and tangents, in the qualities determining good positions for a battle ground, in calculations about the declination of a projectile. Suddenly I remembered that my father had advised me to seek out in Petersburg our distant relative, Alexandra Ivanovna Gratcheva, and go and visit her. I got a directory, found her address, and set out for a place somewhere on the Gorokhavaya. After some little difficulty I found Alexandra Ivanovna’s room; she was living in her sister’s house.

“I opened the door and stood there, hardly seeing anything at first. A stout woman was standing with her back to me, near the single small window of dull green glass. She was bending over a smoky paraffin stove. The room was filled with the odour of paraffin and burning fat. The woman turned round and saw me, and from a corner a barefooted boy, wearing a loose-belted blouse, jumped up and ran quickly towards me. I looked closely at him, and saw at once that he was an idiot,

and, though I did not recoil before him, in reality there was a feeling in my heart like that of fear. The idiot looked unintelligently at me, uttering strange sounds, something like *oorli, oorli, oorli.…*

"'Don't be afraid, he won't touch it,' said the woman to the idiot, coming forward. And then to me—'What can I do for you?' she added.

"I gave my name and reminded her of my father. She was glad to see me, her face brightened up, she exclaimed in surprise and began to apologise for not having the room in order. The idiot boy came closer to me, and cried out more loudly, *oorli, oorli.…*

"'This is my boy, he's been like that from birth,' said Alexandra Ivanovna with a sad smile. 'What of it.… It's the will of God. His name is Stepan.'

"Hearing his name the idiot cried out in a shrill, birdlike voice:

"*'Papan!'*

"Alexandra Ivanovna patted him caressingly on the shoulder.

"'Yes, yes, Stepan, Stepan.… You see, he guessed we were speaking about him and so he introduced himself.'

"*'Papan!'* cried the idiot again, turning his eyes first on his mother and then on me.

"In order to show some interest in the boy I said to him, 'How do you do, Stepan,' and took him by the hand. It was cold, puffy, lifeless. I felt a certain aversion, and only out of politeness went on:

“‘I suppose he’s about sixteen.’

“‘Oh, no,’ answered the mother. ‘Everybody thinks he’s about sixteen, but he’s over twenty-nine. … His beard and moustache have never grown.’

“We talked together. Alexandra Ivanovna was a quiet, timid woman, weighed down by need and misfortune. Her sharp struggle against poverty had entirely killed all boldness of thought in her and all interest in anything outside the narrow bounds of this struggle. She complained to me of the high price of meat, and about the impudence of the cab drivers; told me of some people who had won money in a lottery, and envied the happiness of rich people. All the time of our conversation Stepan kept his eyes fixed on me. He was apparently struck by and interested in my military overcoat. Three times he put out his hand stealthily to touch the shining buttons, but drew it back each time as if he were afraid.

“‘Is it possible your Stepan cannot say even one word?’ I asked.

“Alexandra Ivanovna shook her head sadly.

“‘No, he can’t speak. He has a few words of his own, but they’re not really words—just mutterings. For example, he calls himself *Papan*; when he wants something to eat he says *mnya*; he calls money *teki*. Stepan,’ she continued, turning to her son, ‘where is your *teki*; show us your *teki*.’

“Stepan jumped up quickly from his chair, ran into a dark corner, and crouched down on his heels. I heard the jingling of some copper coins and the boy’s voice saying *oorli, oorli*, but this time in a growling, threatening tone.

“‘He’s afraid,’ explained the mother; ‘though he doesn’t understand what money is, he won’t let anyone touch it … he won’t even let me. … Well, well, we won’t touch your money, we won’t touch it,’ she went to her son and soothed him. …

“I began to visit them frequently. Stepan interested me, and an idea came to me to try and cure him according to the system of a certain Swiss doctor, who tried to cure his feebleminded patients by the slow road of logical development. ‘He has a few weak impressions of the outer world and of the connection between phenomena,’ I thought. ‘Can one not combine two or three of these ideas, and so give a fourth, a fifth, and so on? Is it not possible by persistent exercise to strengthen and broaden this poor mind a little?’

“I brought him a doll dressed as a coachman. He was much pleased with it, and laughed and exclaimed, showing the doll and saying *Papan*! The doll, however, seemed to awaken some doubt in his mind, and that same evening Stepan, who was usually well-disposed to all that was small and weak, tried to break the doll’s head on the floor. Then I brought him pictures, tried to interest him in boxes of bricks, and talked to him, naming the different objects and pointing them out to him. But either the Swiss doctor’s system was not a good one or I didn’t know how to put it into practice—Stepan’s development seemed to make no progress at all.

“He was very fond of me in those days. When I came to visit them he ran to meet me, uttering rapturous cries. He never took his eyes off me, and when I ceased to pay him special attention he came up and licked my hands, my shoes, my

uniform, just like a dog. When I went away he stood at the window for a long time, and cried so pitifully that the other lodgers in the house complained of him to the landlady.

“But my personal affairs were in a bad way. I failed at the examination, failed unusually badly in the last but one examination in fortifications. Nothing remained but to collect my belongings and go back to my regiment. I don’t think that in all my life I shall ever forget that dreadful moment when, coming out of the lecture-hall, I walked across the great vestibule of the Academy. Good Lord! I felt so small, so pitiful and so humbled, walking down those broad steps covered with grey felt carpet, having a crimson stripe at the side and a white linen tread down the middle.

“It was necessary to get away as quickly as possible. I was urged to this by financial considerations—in my purse I had only ten copecks and one ticket for a dinner at a student’s restaurant.

“I thought to myself: ‘I must get my “dismissal” quickly and set out at once. Oh, the irony of that word “dismissal.”’ But it seemed the most difficult thing in the world. From the Chancellor of the Academy I was sent to the General Staff, thence to the Commandant’s office, then to the local intendant, then back to the Academy, and at last to the Treasury. All these places were open only at special times: some from nine to twelve, some from three to five. I was late at all of them, and my position began to appear critical.

“When I used my dinner ticket I had thoughtlessly squandered my ten copecks also. Next day, when I felt the pangs of hunger,

I resolved to sell my textbooks. Thick *Baron Bego*, adapted by Bremiker, bound, I sold for twenty-five copecks; *Professor Lobko* for twenty; solid *General Durop* no one would buy.

"For two days I was half starved. On the third day there only remained to me three copecks. I screwed up my courage and went to ask a loan from some of my companions, but they all excused themselves by saying there was a Torricellian vacuum in their pockets, and only one acknowledged having a few roubles, but he never lent money. As he explained, with a gentle smile, '"Loan oft loses both itself and friend," as Shakespeare says in one of his immortal works.'

"Three copecks! I indulged in tragic reflections. Should I spend them all at once on a box of ten cigarettes, or should I wait until my hunger became unbearable, and then buy bread?

"How wise I was to decide on the latter! Towards evening I was as hungry as Robinson Crusoe on his island, and I went out on to the Nevsky Prospect. Ten times I passed and repassed Philipof's the baker's, devouring with my eyes the immense loaves of bread in the windows. Some had yellow crust, some red, and some were strewn with poppy-seed. At last I resolved to go in. Some schoolboys stood there eating hot pies, holding them in scraps of grey greasy paper. I felt a hatred against them for their good fortune.

"'What would you like?' asked the shopman.

"I put on an indifferent air, and answered superciliously:

"'Cut me off a pound of black bread. ...'

"I was far from being at my ease while the man skilfully cut the

bread with his broad knife. And suddenly I thought to myself: 'Suppose it's more than two and a half copecks a pound, what shall I do if the man cuts it overweight? I know it's possible to owe five or ten roubles in a restaurant, and say to the waiter, "Put it down to my account, please," but what can one do if one hasn't enough by *one* copeck?'

"Hurrah! The bread cost exactly three copecks. I shifted about from one foot to another while it was being wrapped up in paper. As soon as I got out of the shop and felt in my pocket the soft warmth of the bread, I wanted to cry out for joy and begin to munch it, as children do those crusts which they steal from the table after a long day's romping, to eat as they lie in their beds. And I couldn't restrain myself. Even in the street I thrust into my mouth two large tasty morsels.

"Yes. I tell you all this in almost a cheerful tone. But I was far from cheerful then. Add to my torture of hunger the stinging shame of failure; the near prospect of being the laughingstock of my regimental companions; the charming amiability of the official on whom depended my cursed 'dismissal'.... I tell you frankly, in those days I was face to face all the time with the thought of suicide.

"Next day my hunger again seemed unbearable. I went along to Alexandra Ivanovna. As soon as Stepan saw me he went into an ecstasy. He cried out, jumped about me, and licked my coat-sleeve. When at length I sat down he placed himself near me on the floor and pressed up against my legs. Alexandra Ivanovna was obliged to send him away by force.

"It was very unpleasant to have to ask a loan from this poor

woman, who herself found life so difficult, but I resolved I must do so.

"'Alexandra Ivanovna,' said I. 'I've nothing to eat. Lend me what money you can, please.'

"She wrung her hands.

"'My dear boy, I haven't a copeck. Yesterday I pawned my brooch. ... Today I was able to buy something in the market, but tomorrow I don't know what I shall do.'

"'Can't you borrow a little from your sister?' I suggested.

"Alexandra Ivanovna looked round with a frightened air, and whispered, almost in terror:

"'What are you saying? What! Don't you know I live here on her charity? No, we'd better think of some other way of getting it.'

"But the more we thought the more difficult it appeared. After a while we became silent. Evening came on, and the room was filled with a heavy wearisome gloom. Despair and hate and hunger tortured me. I felt as if I were abandoned on the edge of the world, alone and humiliated.

"Suddenly something touched my side. I turned. It was Stepan. He held out to me on his palm a little pile of copper money, and said: '*Teki, teki, teki.* ...'

"I did not understand. Then he threw his money on to my knee, called out once more—*teki*—and ran off into his corner.

"Well, why should I hide it? I wept like a child; sobbed out, long and loudly. Alexandra Ivanovna wept also, out of pity and

tenderness, and from his far corner Stepan uttered his pitiful, unmeaning cry of oorli, *oorli, oorli*.

“When I became quieter I felt better. The unexpected sympathy of the idiot boy had suddenly warmed and soothed my heart, and shown me that it is possible to live, and that one ought to live, as long as there is love and compassion in the world.”

“That is why,” concluded Zimina, finishing his story, “that is why I pity all these unfortunates, and why I can’t deny that they are human beings.” Yes, and by the way, his sympathy brought me happiness. Now I’m very glad I didn’t become a “moment”—that’s our nickname for the officers of the General Staff. Since that time I have had a full and broad life, and promises to be as full in the future. I’m superstitious about it.